

# Women's education in India – an overview

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Women's education was largely encouraged in ancient Indian society. They were provided educational opportunity comparable to men. The social evils like 'purdah', 'sati', enforced widowhood and child-marriage crept into the Indian society much later and resulted in the degradation of their status. Under the British rule, the East India Company was reluctant to take up the responsibility of girl's education for a long time so as not to offend the natives on social customs. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some progressive Indians and English men like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, David Hare and Annie Besant worked for making women aware of education.

It is only after independence that the issue of women's education was taken up seriously by the government. Women's education becomes very essential when we accept that the mother is the best teacher for her child. Swami Vivekananda believed that there is no scope for the progress of a country where the women are uneducated. Jawaharlal Nehru rightly observed that when we educate a boy, we educate a single individual, but when we educate a girl we educate a family.

Soon after independence, the University Education Commission (1948-49) under the chairmanship of Dr. Radhakrishnan laid special emphasis on the education of women. Some of its major recommendations were:-

- a) The education of women should be in conformity with the requirements of women in order to make them successful and good housewives.
- b) Women should be given maximum facilities for education.
- c) Women should be encouraged to acquire education in home science including home economics and home management.
- d) Women should be well informed about their rights and duties pertaining to the society and nations.

The Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) under the chairmanship of Dr. L. S. Mudaliar recommended diversification of courses at secondary and higher secondary stages with special facilities for teaching Home Science to girls. On the recommendation of the Planning Commission (1957), the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59) headed by Mrs. Durgabai Deshmukh, was appointed to examine the problems of girls education in India. Some its major recommendations were:-

- a) The education of girls should be regarded as a major problem of education and determined effort should be made to bridge the wide gap between education of boys and girls.
- b) A National Council for the Education of Girls should be set up and a separate unit for women's education should be set up at the centre.
- c) In each State, a woman should be appointed as Joint Director and be placed in charge of girl's education.
- d) There should be identical curricula for boys and girls at the primary stage and differentiation may be made at the secondary stage.

National Council of Women's Education appointed Hansa Mehta Committee in 1962 to suggest measures for the improvement of women's education. Some its recommendations were:-

- i) Separate primary schools or middle schools for girls should be started where there is such demand and where there is adequate enrolment.
- ii) Number of women teachers should be increased in primary schools.
- iii) There should be common curriculum for boys and girls at the primary and middle stages.
- iv) Girls should be provided with necessary facilities like scholarship, free transport and stipends.

The chairman of the National Council for Women's Education appointed a committee in 1963 under the chairmanship of Sri M. Bhaktabalsalam, the then Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, to suggest ways and means of achieving substantial progress in women's education. Some of its recommendations were establishing girls' school in all areas, entrusting states to take up the responsibility of creating public opinion in favour of women education, appointment of women teacher in primary school and providing education to adult women.

The Education Commission (1964-66) or Kothari Commission specially emphasized on the education of girls. The commission observed that for full development of our human resources and for moulding the character of children during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of women is of greater importance than that of men. As per the data presented by the commission, in 1901, the percentage of literacy among women was only 0.8. The number of girls enrolled for every 100 boys was only 12 at the primary stage and 4 at the secondary. The total enrolment in higher education was only 264 including 76 girls studying in Medical Colleges and 11 in college of education. Much faster progress was made during the next 50 years, both in raising their social status and in developing their education. The National Policy on Education (1968), which was subsequently, formulated echoes the proposals of Kothari Commission. It observed that education of girls should receive emphasis, not only on the grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. Consequently, the gap between the educational level of boys and girls had decreased at all stages from 1947 to 1965; and further narrowed down between 1965 and 1985.

The progress of education was reviewed in 1985, and it was found that the gap between the education of male and female population was still very large. The government took note of the situation and made specific proposal for development of women's education in the National Policy on education, 1986. It stated that the National System of Education will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, text books, the training and orientation of teacher, decision-makers and administrators. The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to and retention in elementary education will receive overriding priority. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different level. During the last 69 years since independence, the government of India has been striving hard to achieve its target in different aspects of education including that of women in terms of literacy rate, enrollment of girls at school stage and their participation in the educative process.

Though the government of India has made earnest efforts, since independence, to improve the educational status of women and met with considerable success yet there is much to be done to bring them at par with men. There are certain factors, which hamper the progress of girls, both at school and college level. First, a large number of girls of school going age are not enrolled in schools because they have to assist their mothers in domestic work. It has been reported that of all the non-enrolled children, 70% are girls. While the enrolment ratio of boys is around 100%, it is only about 83% for girls at the primary stage. The attitude of parents, especially in rural areas is not favourable to girls' education.

These beliefs have given rise to another problem of 'child marriage' which is still prevalent in some region. Even as child marriage remains a legal offence, it continues to be prevalent in Madhya Pradesh, where 16.4% of the girls, most of them from rural areas, are married off between the age of 10 and 14. According Human Development Report 1998, 16.6% of the rural girls and 11% of the urban girls in the 10 to 14 age group are married. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1978, raised a minimum age of marriage to 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls. But in violation of these laws, the evil of child marriage still persists. This is a great problem affecting the education of girls.

The economic dependence of women on men is a great barrier threatening their self respect. The dominance of male members of the family over female members can be explained in terms of economic dependence. The incidences of wife beating, wife abuse, physical exploitation by men, killings for dowry and similar other acts of violence against women occurs because of this reason. Attempts have been made to educate girls in such a way that they become economically independent. On the one hand this will develop confidence in them and on the other; they will be able to assist their families economically. This will lead to an overall improvement of the quality of life.

Apart from these the problems illiteracy, poverty, insufficient girls schools, lack of proper transport in rural areas and appropriate school rooms are deterrents in primary education. They still threat the development of women education in India.

In conclusion, we can add that women of contemporary India are becoming very conscious of their social, economic, intellectual, mental and spiritual development. In spite of all the odds they are trying to gain social and economic parity with men. Therefore, they cannot be deprived of education at any cost and greater attention should be paid to the problems of training and development of women. It may be pointed out that there cannot be educated men without educated women. Hence, the education of girls should be emphasized not only on grounds of social justice, but also because it accelerates economic and social transformation.

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